



Research Office
Legislative Council Secretariat



Information Note

Recent enhancements in early childhood education policy in selected places

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1. Introduction

1.1 In Hong Kong, the number of kindergarten students aged below six has fallen by a total of 22% over the past five years to 136 100 in 2023, underpinned by an ultra-low fertility rate and despite the provision of government subsidy for early childhood education under the Kindergarten Education Scheme (“KES”) launched in September 2017.¹ The continued downtrend in infant population is taking a toll on the financial sustainability of many kindergartens, as the subsidy amount is linked to enrolment. While most (77%) of the local kindergartens reported in a survey that they are facing financial hardship, as many as 60 kindergartens have ceased operation over the past three years.² In anticipation of a more challenging landscape in the medium term, some stakeholders have called for stepping up of policy support for kindergartens to ensure their long-term sustainability.

1.2 Globally, many governments are facing the similar pressure of falling or low fertility and some of them take this opportunity to improve the early childhood education services, like (a) enhancing accessibility of kindergartens; (b) improving the quality of kindergarten education; and (c) ensuring financial viability of service operators. These places include England, Ireland, Japan, and the Mainland.

1.3 At the request of Hon CHU Kwok-keung, the Research Office has selected Quebec Province of Canada and South Korea for detailed study of the measures taken to help the sector of early childhood care and education (“ECCE”) cope with the challenges arising from changing demography. Similar to Hong Kong, most of the kindergartens and daycare centres in the two selected places are run by the private sector either for profit or non-profit purposes, along with substantial subsidies from their governments. Moreover, some of the

¹ For presentation convenience and unless indicated otherwise, school years beginning in September will be denoted as calendar years in this information note. For instance, 2024 refers to the school year 2024/2025.

² 香港教育工作者聯會(2023)和 東網(2024).

measures taken in these two places are globally acclaimed as good practice.³ More specifically in Quebec, the government has been subsidizing the ECCE sector for over two decades. The sector has enjoyed growth and financial resilience thanks to a funding model that closely matches the costs of ECCE operators. In South Korea, the government launched a five-year plan in 2023 to reform ECCE, aiming to reduce the burden of parental care and thereby encourage childbirth. This *Information Note* begins with an overview of recent developments of kindergartens in Hong Kong, followed by a quick summary of key overseas policies supporting ECCE. It will then switch to the policy measures of Quebec and South Korea.

2. Recent developments of kindergartens in Hong Kong

2.1 In Hong Kong, the Education Bureau (“EDB”) launched the KES for non-profit making kindergartens in September 2017, with a view to providing affordable and quality early childhood education for all children aged 3-6. *First* and foremost, a unit subsidy on a per student basis is given to the service operators under KES, within which 60% is prescribed as teachers’ salary portion for payment of salaries and pension expenses, and the remaining 40% for operating expenses (**Appendix**).⁴ In 2024, the annual unit subsidy ranges from HK\$39,200 for half-day classes to HK\$50,960 for whole-day classes and HK\$62,720 for long whole-day classes. *Secondly*, KES-participating kindergartens (“KES-KGs”) can either be supported by provision of low-rent school premises by the Government, or a 50% subsidy of the private rentals subject to a monthly ceiling. *Thirdly* on teaching quality, KES-KGs are required to (a) maintain a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:11 exclusive of the principal, (b) follow specified salary ranges for teaching staff; and (c) follow curriculum guidelines laid down by EDB.

³ Burlone (2022), Na & Park (2013), OECD (2014) and UNESCO (2024).

⁴ If needed, KES-KGs may deploy the surplus of the 40% portion to supplement either teachers’ salaries or rental payment.

2.2 In 2023, 738 out of 1 009 kindergartens in Hong Kong are KES-KGs, accounting for 75% of student enrolment and 73% of kindergarten places (**Table 1**).⁵ With KES and other supplementary grants taken together, the annual government expenditure on kindergartens has increased by 57% over the past seven years to HK\$5.8 billion in 2023, taking up about 1% of total government expenditure and equivalent to 0.2% of GDP.⁶

Table 1 – Number of kindergartens and enrolments in 2023 by type⁽¹⁾

Type of KGs	Number of kindergartens	Number of places	Number of students
KES-KGs	738 (73%)	130 210 (73%)	102 489 (75%)
Non-KES local KGs	133 (13%)	30 291 (17%)	22 609 (17%)
Non-KES non-local KGs	138 (14%)	17 516 (10%)	10 997 (8%)
All kindergartens	1 009	178 017	136 095

Note: (1) Figures in brackets represent the share of the corresponding kindergarten type.

Source: Education Bureau (2024h).

2.3 However, kindergarten enrolment has fallen by a total of 22% over the past five years to a 50-year low of 136 095 in 2023, due to the ongoing decline in birth rates in Hong Kong and the reported relocation of families.⁷ Worse still, population of children aged 3-6 is projected to shrink further by 26% in the next five years to 100 300 by 2028 (**Figure 1**).⁸ As such, the Government has regularized the relocation grant to encourage KES-KGs (a) in those districts facing more severe ageing pressure to relocate to new development areas, or (b) at rented private premises to relocate to premises of lower-rent or government-owned school premises.⁹

⁵ Some kindergartens operate childcare centres (“CCCs”) for children below three years old in the same premises. Such Kindergarten-cum-CCCs are monitored by the Joint Office for Kindergartens and Child Care Centres of the Education Bureau.

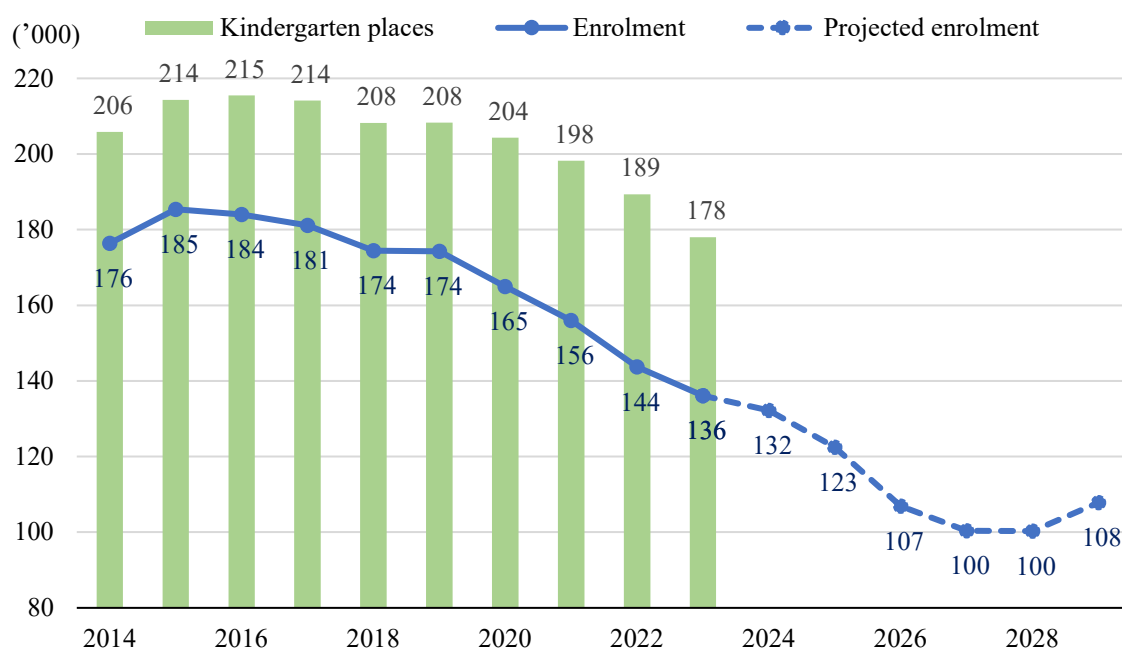
⁶ The Budget (2018, 2024).

⁷ Over 75% of surveyed kindergartens cited emigration as a factor affecting their enrolment numbers. See Asia News Network (2023).

⁸ Education Bureau (2024d).

⁹ The Relocation Grant was piloted in 2021 and the average grant amount doubled to HK\$3 million per kindergarten in 2022. After the Policy Address 2023, the Relocation Grant has been regularized as from 2024.

Figure 1 – Trend of kindergarten enrolment in Hong Kong



Note: Figures from 2024 onward indicate projected population aged 3-5.

Sources: Education Bureau (2024b, 2024f).

2.4 The continued plunge in enrolment has given rise to a couple of major issues of concerns in the local ECCE sector, as it threatened the sustainability of many kindergartens, with about 90% of surveyed schools indicating that they were facing financial challenges and over 75% having laid off staff in 2023.¹⁰ *First of all*, some kindergarten operators have called for increased funding support and greater flexibility in the deployment of subsidy, considering that the ratio of public expenditure on ECCE (i.e. the sum of kindergarten education and childcare) to GDP was just around 0.3% of GDP in Hong Kong in 2023-2024, compared with average figure of 0.8% for the 38 member economies of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (“OECD”).¹¹ *Secondly*, some stakeholders asked for redirecting the resources from kindergartens to childcare services for children aged below three.¹² In fact, there are only some 9 000 subsidized childcare spaces for children below three, representing 7% of all children in that age group. More specifically for infants under two years old, there were only

¹⁰ 香港教育工作者聯會(2023).

¹¹ In the 2023-2024 fiscal year, government expenditure on pre-primary education amounted to 0.2% of GDP, and total expenditure on CCCs (including day CCCs, residential CCCs and rehabilitation programmes for pre-primary children) took up another 0.1% of GDP. See The Budget (2024), Labour and Welfare Bureau (2024), OECD (2023) and 香港教育工作者聯會(2021).

¹² GovHK (2023), Education Bureau (2024f) and 點新聞(2023).

about 1 300 subsidized childcare places offered, representing 1.6% of the infant population (**Table 2**).¹³

Table 2 – Number of subsidized CCC places in Hong Kong in 2023

	Under 2 years old	2 years old
Population of children	81 953	46 281
Subsidized CCC places	1 335	7 637
<i>of which: Standalone CCC places</i>	<i>1 075</i>	<i>113</i>
<i>Kindergarten-cum-CCC places</i>	<i>260</i>	<i>7 524</i>

Source: Social Welfare Department (provided by email).

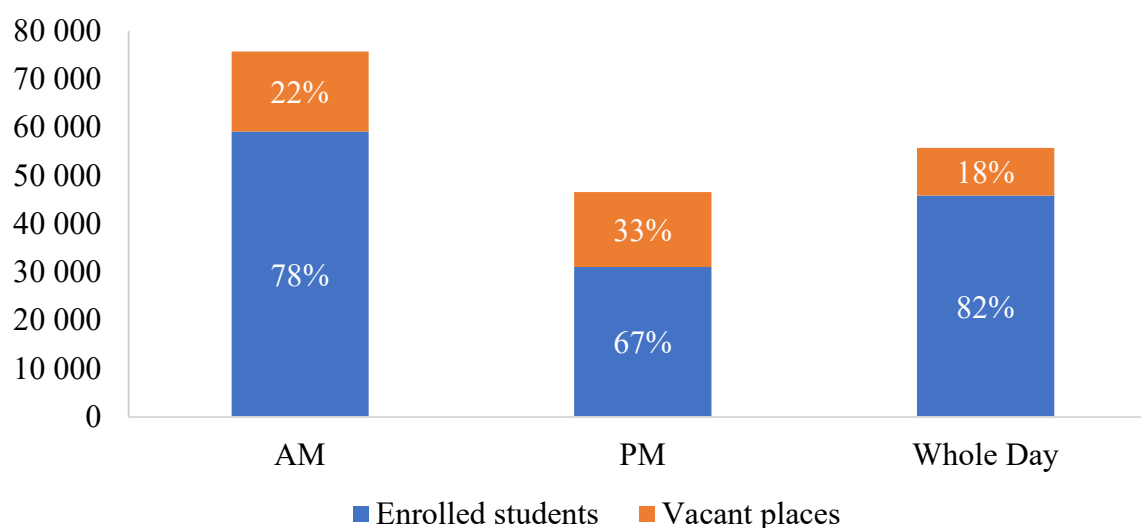
2.5 **Thirdly**, some observers suggested converting half-day kindergartens into whole-day kindergartens with longer service hours, as the enrolment rate of the latter was markedly higher than the former (**Figure 2**).¹⁴ The Government has nonetheless dismissed a significant expansion of whole-day kindergarten places because (a) half-day kindergarten classes could provide more family time and hence were good for children; and (b) free whole-day kindergarten services remain not an internationally common practice. **Fourthly**, there were suggestions to make good use of over 10 000 kindergarten teachers, such as adjusting teacher-pupil ratios and reducing the average class size (e.g. from the existing 30 students to 15-20 students per class) for better teaching quality and student-teacher interaction. **Last but not the least**, some observers advocated enhanced support for special education need (“SEN”) in kindergartens like funding for a SEN coordinator post.¹⁵

¹³ According to 2021 Population Census, the number of children aged below three was 128 234, of which 81 953 were aged below two. See Census and Statistics Department (2023a) and Legislative Council Secretariat (2019).

¹⁴ Education Bureau (2024e, 2024h).

¹⁵ In respect of support to SEN children, the Government maintained that it would continue to support them under the established mechanism, i.e. a number of government departments work together to provide various services to children with SEN, including the Department of Health, the Hospital Authority, the Social Welfare Department and EDB. See 東方日報 (2019), 民建聯 (2024) and Education Bureau (2022).

Figure 2 – Enrolled students and vacant places in kindergartens in Hong Kong in 2023



Source: Education Bureau (2024h).

3. Recent global developments

3.1 Globally, many advanced economies are striving to combat the challenge of lower birth rates, although the respective declines in their student populations are not as steep as the case seen in Hong Kong. In short, many governments took this opportunity to direct the resources to improve the accessibility and quality of ECCE, with a view to relieving the burden of parents and encouraging childbirths on the one hand, and stabilizing the demand for ECCE on the other.¹⁶

3.2 For instance, *the operating hours of kindergarten and childcare service are lengthened in many places in order to enhance child development outcomes and support working families*. In England, the number of hours of free childcare services for children under three will be doubled from 15 hours to 30 hours per week in September 2025 (i.e. about six hours a day).¹⁷ In Norway, kindergartens are usually open at least 41 hours a week (i.e. about eight hours a day), driven by their social mandate to serve parents' needs.¹⁸ Separately, the *ECCE system is integrated in some places by combining services for children aged below three and those aged 3-5 within the same establishments to enhance*

¹⁶ United Nations Population Fund (2019).

¹⁷ Free childcare services are subject an income cap of £100,000 (HK\$1,009,000) per parent.

¹⁸ The Kindergarten Act guarantees parents' participation in kindergarten's decision-making, including drawing up of annual plans, through parents' council and coordinating committee. See European Commission (2023a) and Government.no (2023).

education provision to the infant ages. This is seen not only in the *Nordic countries* (e.g. Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland) where ECCE is governed by a unified framework, but also in *Japan* which reformed its ECCE system in 2019 to integrate the daycare sector and kindergarten sector.¹⁹ For the *Mainland*, there has been calls for consolidation of resources in the ECCE sector in recent years, after seeing surplus supply of kindergartens amidst continued downtrend in birth rate, reaching historically low of 6.39 per 1 000 people in 2023.²⁰ Shanghai promulgated in November 2022 the nation's first local legislation integrating kindergarten and daycare services under a unified system, while Shenzhen encourages the provision of nursery classes (for children under age three) in kindergartens by establishing new regulations in August 2024 to standardize nursery service in kindergartens.²¹

3.3 Moreover, ***some governments have designed the funding models for the ECCE sector to offer greater funding stability to kindergartens.*** In *Singapore*, ECCE operators need to go through a competitive funding process for a five-year term. Selection is based on the strength of their proposals (e.g. development plan) and demonstration of a good track record in delivering quality preschool services.²² This funding model provides more financial certainty and is practicable in Singapore as service providers are usually large operators or consortia formed by smaller operators, reducing the management burden of the Singaporean government.²³ At the other end of the spectrum, *Ireland* adopts a unit-subsidy model (similar to that in Hong Kong) under which the funding amount is linked to the number of students at a fixed rate per child per week.²⁴ However, the Irish government introduced a new funding stream called “Core Funding” in September 2022, ***providing supplementary funding***

¹⁹ European Commission (2023a, 2023b, 2024) and OECD (2019).

²⁰ 國家統計局(2024) and 搜狐(2024).

²¹ 南方周末(2024), 上海市教育委員會(2023), 深圳市人民政府(2020) and 深圳市教育局(2024).

²² Funding support for childcare centres and kindergartens in Singapore are largely used for salary payments, with additional grants allocated for other purposes (e.g. setting up new centres, teachers' professional development, and support programmes for children with special learning needs). More grant amounts may be paid to those operators with higher proportions of qualified staff. See Bull et al. (2018), Early Childhood Development Agency (2024a, 2024b) and Ministry of Social and Family Development (2019a).

²³ For instance, there are five operators offering approximately 75 000 places under the Anchor Operator Scheme, whereas there are 29 operators/consortia running 324 centres offering approximately 27 000 places under the Partner Operator Scheme. See Ministry of Social and Family Development (2019b) and Early Childhood Development Agency (2020, 2024a).

²⁴ Participating operators receive a weekly subsidy of EUR69 (HK\$593) per child in 2024 from the Irish government. See Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2024).

*based on capacity factors (e.g. the number of places offered and the number of hours of provision) for greater funding stability to ECCE operators, irrespective whether the ECCE places are utilized or not.*²⁵ The budget for Core Funding amounted to EUR331 million (HK\$2.8 billion) in 2024, accounting for about 2.7% of the overall government budget.²⁶

4. Recent policy developments in Quebec

4.1 Quebec has been acclaimed as the Canadian leader in affordable childcare since the launch of a universal childcare programme by the provincial government in 1997. Overseen by the Ministry of Family (“MFA”), the ECCE services target children aged 0-5 and are mainly provided by two types of the private-sector centres. *First* are the early childhood centres called “centres de la petite enfance” which are non-profit making and run by boards of directors comprising mostly parent users. *Secondly* are the profit-making daycare centres called “garderies”.²⁷ In 2023, 78% of the childcare places in Quebec were subsidized, including (a) all places in early childhood centres; and (b) half of the places of profit-making daycare centres. For these subsidized childcare centres, parents need to pay a fixed daily fee of only C\$9.1 (HK\$53) in 2024, with a subsidy rate of 80%-90%, subject to annual revision based on inflation.²⁸

4.2 On *funding model*, the government of Quebec offers four major types of subsidies to ECCE, namely (a) operating subsidy; (b) group insurance plan; (c) pension plan; and (d) infrastructure investments. More specifically on operating subsidy, the amount received by each establishment is determined by a detailed funding formula covering four kinds of costs incurred by the operators, as shown below (**Table 3**). In short, funding for both direct services and auxiliary services is linked to student enrolment, but funding for administrative services and premise expense is linked to the number of places offered (given that they are fixed costs regardless of enrolment). To motivate CPEs to maintain high utilization ratio, those ECCE operators failing to meet the minimum

²⁵ Core Funding is based entirely on staffed capacity, even if such places are left vacant afterwards. Yet there must be enough staff in place to satisfy the minimum staff to child ratios as set in the relevant regulations. See Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2022).

²⁶ Citizens Information Board (2024) and Houses of the Oireachtas (2024).

²⁷ There are four types of ECCE service providers in Quebec, namely centres de la petite enfance, subsidized garderies, non-subsidized garderies, and home childcare service provided in a private home. Also, primary schools may also provide kindergarten classes for four-year olds. See Canadian Legal Information Institute (2024) and Akbari et al. (2024).

²⁸ Adjustment is based on consumer price index or increase in educational costs. See Ministère des Finances (2024).

threshold (i.e. 90% of places offered) will have a lower funding for both administrative and premise costs on a scale proportional to the shortfall.²⁹

Table 3 – Major funding components of operating subsidy in Quebec in 2024

	Components	Funding rates
1.	Direct care services to children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fixed daily rate per enrolled child varies by age groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ C\$66.86 (HK\$390) for children under 1.5 years old; ✓ C\$42.09 (HK\$245) for 1.5 to under 4 years old; and ✓ C\$33.83 (HK\$197) for 4 years old and above.
2.	Auxiliary services (e.g. food preparation, cleaning, snow removal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fixed daily rate per enrolled child of C\$8.99 (HK\$52).
3.	Administrative services (e.g. accounting, legal and insurance fees)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fixed rate⁽¹⁾ per childcare place offered of C\$2,387.05 (HK\$13,917) per place per annum for the first 60 places; C\$2,122.07 per place per annum for those beyond 60.
4.	Premise costs (e.g. rent, property taxes and fire insurance)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fixed rate⁽¹⁾ per childcare place offered of C\$625.45 (HK\$3,646) per place per annum; Centres with less than 32 places will be granted amount for 32 places; The cap varies by geographical areas, e.g. C\$2,065 (HK\$12,245) per place per annum in Montreal, C\$1,772 (HK\$10,508) in other urban areas, etc.

Notes: (1) If enrolment falls below a threshold of 90% of places offered, the subsidy will be reduced on a scale linked to the shortfall.

(2) The table excludes other allowances and adjustments for simplicity.

Source: Gouvernement du Québec (2024a).

4.3 With a view to improving service quality and accessibility, the Quebec government offers the following incentives in the aforementioned subsidy scheme through supplementary allocations:

- (a) **Adjustment factor for qualifications and compensation:** If the overall teaching staff cost in an ECCE centre is higher than the reference rate for legitimate reasons (e.g. more experienced staff), the daily subsidy rate for direct services will be adjusted upwards based on a formula. On the other hand, if an ECCE centre fails to meet the provincial staff qualification requirement (i.e. at least 33% of staff with an education degree), its subsidy will be reduced;

²⁹ For instance, if a centre's enrolment rate is at 75%, the amount of subsidies for administrative services and premise costs will be reduced by 15% (i.e. 90%-75%). See Gouvernement du Québec (2024a).

- (b) **Special allowance for SEN children:** To ensure better inclusion of children with SEN, an allowance is allocated to cover costs related to equipment or accommodations required for designing individual intervention plans for a child with SEN;³⁰ and
- (c) **Adjustment for children from disadvantaged backgrounds:** To encourage establishment of childcare facilities in low-income neighbourhoods, an additional allowance is granted to ECCs with at least 8% of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (i.e. whose parents satisfy the criteria to benefit from childcare fee exemption). The total amount of operating subsidy received by such centre would be increased by 3% to 25%, depending on the proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

4.4 *The Quebec government has also fine-tuned the funding formula from time to time, keeping track of latest development in early childhood education and in society.* As an example, the subsidy for “direct services” used to be a single flat rate for all children aged above 1.5 years before 2016-2017, but was reformed into variable rates by major age groups to reflect the resources required to take care of them. As another example, the enrolment threshold under “administrative services” and “premise costs” was raised from an initial 80% to 85% in 2003-2004, and further to 90% in the 2010s, in line with the province’s policy to boost overall childcare enrolment. But they were temporarily reduced to 80% in 2021-2022 in order to provide more flexibility to the childcare centres to cope with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.³¹

4.5 On policy effectiveness, *the multi-faceted funding model in Quebec seems to have provided more stable financing to kindergartens, allowing them to maintain high occupancy without being overly affected by fluctuations in actual enrolment.*³² The separation of subsidy for direct costs and overhead costs, especially with the latter tied to places (and less directly to enrolment), provides a buffer against enrolment fluctuations. This stability is crucial in maintaining accessibility of childcare spaces to families. But *some critics consider the funding model quite costly*, as the government contributed 80%-90% of the total cost and total public funding for subsidized childcare centres amounted to C\$3.0 billion (HK\$17.2 billion) in 2023, equivalent to 2.6%

³⁰ The allowance includes a lump sum of C\$2,200 (HK\$12,800) per newly registered SEN child and a daily subsidy of C\$51.08 (HK\$297) per SEN child per day. See Government of Canada (2022) and Gouvernement du Québec (2024a).

³¹ Gouvernement du Québec (2001, 2004, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2021, 2024a).

³² Bloomberg (2021).

of the budget or 0.5% of GDP of Quebec.³³ Moreover, childcare centres face heavy burden in reporting detailed expenditure and operational statistics.³⁴

4.6 That said, this funding model is applauded by the federal government of Canada in its national ECCE reform.³⁵ As women with young children in Quebec are more likely to participate in the labour market than those in other provinces, some studies suggest that the economic benefits brought by its ECCE programme outweigh the costs.³⁶ In short, the broader economy in Quebec gains by C\$1.5-C\$2.8 in return for every dollar spent on early childhood education.³⁷

5. Recent policy developments in South Korea

5.1 The fertility rate in South Korea has been on a downward trend in recent years, reaching a record low of 0.72 births per woman in 2023, amongst the bottom three in the world.³⁸ For Seoul, its fertility rate was even lower at just 0.55.³⁹ During 2018-2022, kindergarten enrolment plunged by 18% in South Korea, with an estimated 12 416 daycare centres and kindergartens (representing 32% of the total) on the brink of shutting down in the next four years, with greater pressure in larger cities (e.g. Busan, Seoul and Daegu).⁴⁰ According to a survey conducted by the Bank of Korea, “challenges in balancing work and childcare” was identified as one of the root causes behind the country’s declining fertility rate.⁴¹ Another survey revealed that 76% of people would give birth if they could entrust their children to others for childcare.⁴²

5.2 ***In March 2024, the Seoul Metropolitan Government (“SMG”) rolled out a series of short-term measures to support daycare centres at risk of closure,*** in an attempt to break the vicious cycle between the shutdowns of childcare centres and declining fertility rates. ***First***, SMG will, by end of 2024, offer

³³ Total ECCE expenditure (including childcare tax credit, school-based programmes, etc.) totalled C\$5.6 billion (HK\$33.3 billion) in 2023, equivalent to 4.8% of provincial budget or 1.0% of provincial GDP. See Fraser Institute (2017) and Akbari et al. (2024).

³⁴ Gouvernement du Québec (2021).

³⁵ Parliament of Canada (2021), UNICEF (2024) and Bloomberg (2021).

³⁶ The labour force participation rate of Quebec women with young children (under the age of three) reached 80% in 2016, much higher than Canada’s national average of 71%. See Statistics Canada (2018)

³⁷ Government of Canada (2022).

³⁸ The Guardian (2024).

³⁹ Reuters (2024).

⁴⁰ The Korea Times (2024b).

⁴¹ Bank of Korea (2023)

⁴² The Korea Herald (2024).

priority support to 600 daycare centres deemed to have highest risk of closure. This support includes improving teacher-child ratio improvement, certification of the daycare centre and hiring of additional assistant teachers and childcare workers.⁴³ **Secondly**, SMG launched a pilot project to transform some of the existing daycare centres from full-time to part-time, making good use of idle spaces and staff for hourly childcare services from 7:30 am to 7:30 pm. Service targets are those children aged from six months to seven years.⁴⁴ **Thirdly**, SMG provides customized business consulting to those centres close to shutdown, stabilizing their operations and increasing their competitiveness. The consulting service includes demand analysis and financial assessments for development of tailored business strategies.

5.3 In March 2023, the Korean government announced a package of measures to boost fertility rate, including a five-year plan to reform ECCE. The thrust of this five-year reform plan is to integrate the childcare and education system, aiming to achieve consistent quality of ECCE services across the country. Under the existing dual system, early childhood education for children aged 3-5 is provided by kindergartens and overseen by the Ministry of Education, while childcare for children aged below five is provided by daycare centres and overseen by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. While these two sectors share broadly similar age brackets of the service targets, they differ in competent ministries, teacher qualifications, financing and operating hours. Moreover, there are visible variations in service quality amongst service providers, resulting in concerns over inequality, cost burden and education quality as well as confusion to parents. After the reform, Ministry of Education will be in charge of the entire ECCE sector and it is tasked to improve and standardize the regulatory framework for all ECCE providers.⁴⁵ Here are the major initiatives:

- (a) **Extending the operating hours of ECCE services to twelve hours:** To accommodate the needs of working parents, the Korean government plans to extend daily ECCE services from eight to 12 hours. This entails eight hours of basic operating hours, plus morning and evening care sessions on need basis. Pilot programmes for care facilities on Saturdays and holidays will begin in 2025;

⁴³ Seoul Metropolitan Government (2024a) and Sedaily (2024).

⁴⁴ Seven part-time daycare centres have been launched so far. See Seoul Metropolitan Government (2024b).

⁴⁵ Review of the funding model appears not the government's major work in its action plan and thus this section on South Korea will not cover its funding model. See Korea Institute of Child Care and Education (2023) and Ministry of Education (2024b).

- (b) **Improved teacher-to-child ratios:** To improve ECCE services, the Korean government aims to improve the caregiver-to-child ratios significantly. The ratio will change from 1:3 to 1:2 for infants aged below one; and from 1:12 to 1:8 for children aged 3-5;
- (c) **Free kindergarten education:** The government has committed to gradually implementing free education for children aged 3-5, starting with five-year-olds in 2025 and extending to children aged 3-4 by 2027. This initiative will cost 2 trillion won (HK\$11.8 billion) per year, alleviating the financial burden of families;⁴⁶
- (d) **Enhancing children support:** A wider range of support will be provided to children, including (i) emotional and psychological support for infants and toddlers to ensure they receive professional assistance when needed; and (ii) support for SEN needs, with an increase in the number of special classes in kindergartens and new establishment of inclusive daycare centres; and
- (e) **Enhanced teacher training:** Annual training for teachers of ECCE services will be gradually expanded from the current minimum of 13 hours to 60 hours, to tie in with the changes under the reform. This will include tailored training that enhances their capabilities in curriculum management and understanding of all infants and toddlers, developing their skills as education and care professionals.

5.4 On **policy coordination and implementation**, the Korean government has set up the Early Childhood Education and Childcare Consolidation Committee in April 2023.⁴⁷ More recently in June 2024, the Korean government has also announced the following implementation plan. ***First***, the Korean government aims to develop a unified curriculum for children from birth to age five by 2027, aligning with global standards and tailor-made for various developmental stages of children. The curriculum will include play-based programmes in language, math, arts, and sports tailored for infants and toddlers.⁴⁸ ***Secondly***, an admission process for integrated institutions under ECCE will be established for parental convenience and fairness. Transition guidance and a

⁴⁶ The Hankyoreh Newspaper (2024).

⁴⁷ Membership of this Committee comprises the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Education, and vice ministers of relevant ministries and key stakeholders (e.g. service operators, teachers, and parents). Under the Ministry of Education, a Taskforce was also set up to oversee the integration process. See Ministry of Education (2023) and The Korea Times (2024a).

⁴⁸ Ministry of Education (2024a).

grace period will be provided to alleviate concerns arising from the two systems. **Thirdly**, to integrate the two sets of teaching qualifications in ECCE, the Korean government proposed two options, namely (a) a single qualification for Early Childhood Teacher for all children aged below six or (b) separate qualifications for Infant Teacher for children aged 0-2 and Preschool Teacher for children aged 3-5. **Fourthly**, the pay gap between daycare teachers and private kindergarten teachers will also be closed.

5.5 On **policy effectiveness**, as the Korean government has just launched its reform measures in ECCE, it is too early to assess its effectiveness. Based on the latest information available, the Ministry of Education has already launched 152 pilot integrated ECCE centres (comprising 68 existing kindergartens and 84 existing day care centres) in September 2024.⁴⁹ However, given that the laws and systems governing the operation of kindergartens and daycare centres are not aligned yet, consolidation of the two systems and full implementation of the ECCE reform is expected to be a lengthy process, in spite of wide support from stakeholders.⁵⁰ The Korean government aims to enact integration laws starting in 2025 for completion in the next few years.

6. Observations

6.1 In **Hong Kong**, the continued downtrend in infant population is taking a toll on the financial sustainability of many kindergartens. In anticipation of more challenging landscape in the medium term, there is advocacy to offer more policy support to kindergartens, including **(a)** increased funding support and greater flexibility in the deployment of subsidy; **(b)** redirecting the resources from kindergartens to childcare services for infants aged below three; **(c)** lengthening the operation of some kindergartens from half-day classes to whole-day classes; **(d)** adjusting teacher-pupil ratios and reducing the average class size; and **(e)** enhanced support for SEN in kindergartens.

6.2 For **Quebec in Canada**, the government has adopted a sophisticated funding model which provides subsidies that closely match the childcare centres' operating costs. While part of the subsidy amount is linked to enrolment numbers, it has incorporated certain adjustments: **(a)** subsidies pertinent to the part of fixed costs are based on places offered, providing a buffer against short-term enrolment fluctuations; **(b)** adjustments have been incorporated to reflect the cost differences in providing services to different groups (e.g. age groups, geographical areas); and **(c)** additional parameters (e.g. teacher

⁴⁹ Ministry of Education (2024c).

⁵⁰ The Asia Business Daily (2024) and NEWSIS (2024).

qualification adjustment) have been included to provide incentives to enhance service quality and accessibility. While the funding model has allowed for financial resilience of Quebec's ECCE sector, it is considered by some as costly to the fiscal system and administratively burdensome.

6.3 In **South Korea**, the government has just launched the reforms in the ECCE sector in April 2023, aiming to integrate the kindergarten and daycare systems by 2027. Upon integration, the Ministry of Education will standardize the regulatory framework for all ECCE providers with a view to achieving consistent and better quality of ECCE services. Major initiatives include: **(a)** extending the operating hours of ECCE services to 12 hours; **(b)** improving teacher-to-child ratios (e.g. from 1:12 to 1:8 for children aged 3-5); **(c)** gradually implementing free education for children aged 3-5; **(d)** increasing provision of emotional and psychological support and SEN support; and **(e)** enhancing teacher training. While the reform has gained support from the ECCE sector and the general public, the outcome has yet to be seen as the initiatives are still in the early pilot stage pending legislative amendments.

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Major funding components under the Kindergarten Education Scheme⁽¹⁾

	Allocation basis	Subsidy amount for the 2024/2025 school year	
1. Basic unit subsidy	fixed rate per student	Half-day: Whole-day: Long whole-day:	HK\$39,200 HK\$50,960 HK\$62,720
2. Kindergarten Activity Grant	fixed rate per student	HK\$260	
3. Grant for a cook	fixed rate per kindergarten	HK\$213,760	
4. Premises maintenance grant⁽²⁾	fixed rate per student	HK\$1,100	
5. Rent subsidies⁽²⁾	actual rental expenditure subject to adjustments/caps by type of kindergarten	Former aided CCCs under SWD ⁽³⁾	Actual rental expenditure
		Other Scheme-KGs operating in public housing estate premises	Actual rental expenditure, adjusted by fill-up rate ⁽⁴⁾
		All other Scheme-KGs	50% of actual rental expenditure, subject to cap ⁽⁵⁾
6. Grant for support to Non-Chinese Speaking (“NCS”) students	tiered subsidy amount according to the number of NCS students admitted	<u>Number of NCS students:</u> 1 to 4 5 to 7 8 to 15 16 to 30 31 or above	<u>Five-tiered amount:</u> HK\$50,000 HK\$193,860 HK\$387,720 HK\$581,580 HK\$775,440

Notes: (1) The list excludes one-off grants (e.g. Grant for Promotion of Chinese Art and Culture, and Smart Kindergarten Grant), Relocation Grant, and grants related to cover the cost of supply teachers.

(2) Only Scheme-KGs operating in rented premises under tenancy agreements are eligible for rental subsidy. Scheme-KGs paying no rent are eligible for Premises Maintenance Grant. Scheme-KGs can only be eligible for either rental subsidy or Premises Maintenance Grant for the school premises concerned.

(3) 246 such establishments were converted into kindergarten-cum-CCCs operating long whole-day classes upon the harmonisation of pre-primary services in 2005.

(4) If the fill-up rate (the number of students enrolled in the morning session or in the afternoon session whichever is higher ÷ total permitted accommodation as stated on the premise's Accommodation Certificate) reaches 50% or more, the rent subsidy amount equals 100% of the rental expenditure; if the fill-up rate ranges from 25% to <50%, rent subsidy amounts to 50% of actual rental expenditure. If fill-up rate falls below 25%, rent subsidy amounts to 25% of actual rental expenditure.

(5) The rental subsidy is capped at the lesser of: (a) 50% of market rent as assessed by the Rating and Valuation Department; or (b) 15% of the basic half-day unit subsidy for all eligible enrolled students in the kindergarten.

Sources: Education Bureau (2019, 2023, 2024b, 2024g).

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Note: ^ Internet resources listed in this section were accessed in November 2024.